

Irving Brown's Cause

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IF IT REALLY IS the end of an era, if the Cold War really is over, we ought to ask: Why?

Part of the answer is Irving Brown, whose memorial service was

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held, appropriately, on May 1 — May Day — in the marble and mosaic grand lobby of the AFL-CIO headquarters in Washington.

Mr. Brown died in February of this year in Paris. He was 77. For four decades he represented the American trade union movement in Europe.

Many Americans do not know that American labor has a foreign policy and has been a potent player in American statecraft. Over the years that policy has generally been consistent and describable in straightforward phrases: "anti-fascist," "anti-communist," "anti-totalitarian," "pro-democracy."

There are many reasons, from patriotic to parochial, that labor is so concerned with foreign policy and so passionately pro-democracy. One reason, as AFL-CIO President Lane Kirkland likes to say, is that, "We don't want to negotiate with an employer who also owns the police, the army, the courts and the atom bomb."

Irving Brown arrived in Europe as World War II was ending. The continent was destitute. Politically, only the communists were well organized. The Soviet Union had taken over the eastern half of Europe, and they were trying to gain influence in the western half. Their chosen instrument, their greatest potential prize, was the trade union movement. The communists knew that whoever spoke for the unions could credibly claim to speak for the workers. They knew that if they could capture control of unions, they could roll the waters of the West, for example, by subverting the Marshall Plan.

Backed with the authority and resources of American unions, Brown helped European unions fight communist doctrine and control. It was not an easy task. The European union movement came out of a leftist tradition of bitter class struggle and class consciousness alien to the American experience. Mr. Brown and his American colleagues

stressed that the biggest issues at stake went beyond left vs. right and on to the contest between free vs. non-free. In most European countries, through the toughest times of the Cold War, the communists were denied the domination they sought.

Later, Mr. Brown was influential in creating the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, which has worked globally to keep unions free and out of communist hands.

And so, in the course of time, the force of totalitarianism was stymied. Not, of course, by the trade union movement alone. There was allied military strength, a trillion dollars worth and more. There were courageous politicians of many democratic ideologies. There was the example of the fruits of a vigorous and often creative private business sector. But the unions were a prime target, and thanks in some large measure to American trade unionists like Irving Brown, the prize was denied to the oppressors.

Now, the tide of totalitarianism

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seems spent. They say it's the end of an era. If so, why? It is a long tale, with many tale-spinners, but let us remember that, in the first instance, totalitarianism foundered because it was prevented from succeeding.

At the memorial service, Mr. Kirkland spoke of the role of trade unionism in the new era: "For years a silent army has been assembling on the path (Brown) trod, but they are silent no more. . . . They have raised the banner of free trade unionism in Poland, and they are changing the course of history."

"In China they have taken to the streets. . . . demanding democracy. In Hungary they are forming independent trade union organizations. They have marched in the streets of South Korea and Chile. In South Africa they are tolling the death knell of apartheid. Wherever working people are rising from their knees and walking erect, they are choosing the path of Irving Brown."

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